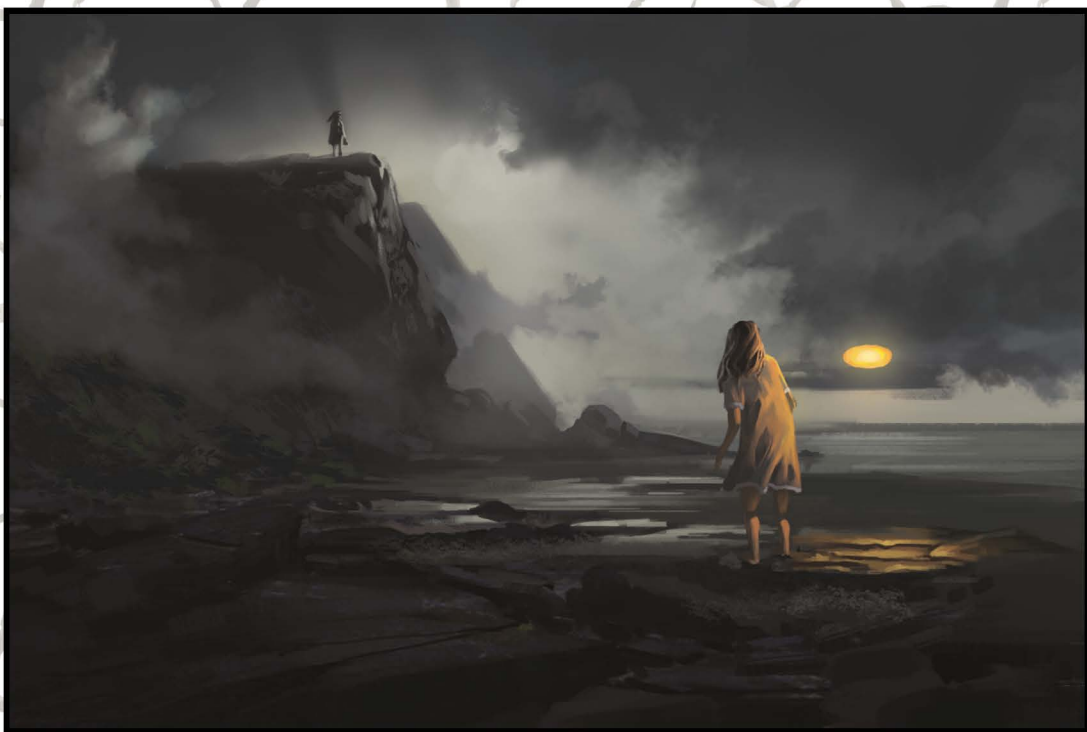


Chapter One:
A Little, Plain, Simple Thing



Maricela “Mari” Muñoz



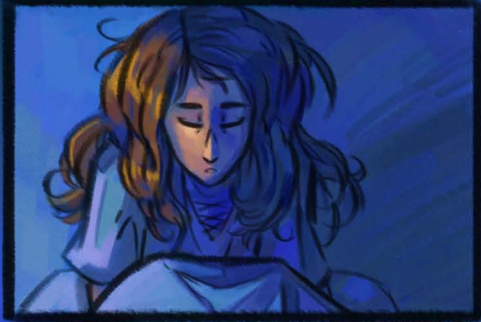
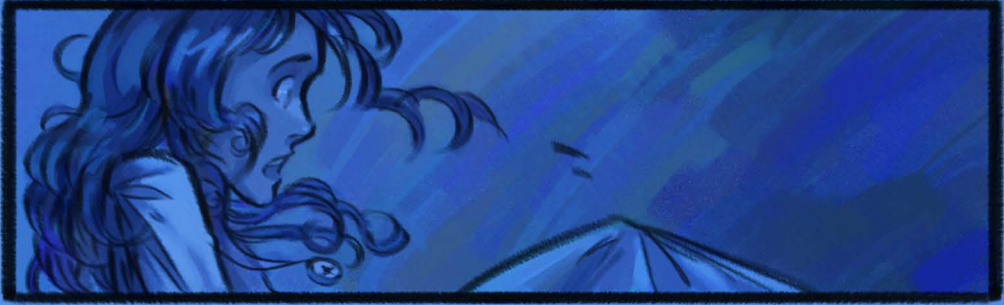
A rocky, mucky shore stretches toward a cliff in the distance as coastal fog rolls in off the ocean. Along the wild and pristine beach walks Maricela “Mari” Muñoz, a scrawny but sturdy and nimble fifteen-year-old girl. Mari’s gait is both weary and unwavering. Her hair is tousled, and she wears a ragged, beige hospital gown. Around her neck hangs a silver pendant featuring a desert wren.

Behind Mari hovers a glossy yellow object, an elongated ellipsoid about the size and shape of a rugby ball. Its surface glows softly, illuminating its immediate environment. This is an ARC (Autonomous Robotic Companion) named Wren.

A ray of light from a full moon pierces the fog, lighting up the cliff like a beacon. Mari glances up and sees someone standing at the top, but Mari is too far away to make out any details.

Thrumming and buzzing break the eerie silence. From behind Mari, a mysterious, hulking creature trudges toward her, but the fog obscures it. Panic washes over Mari as she backs away.

The monster advances, each step a heavy thump. As Mari retreats, she trips over a rock and falls down. The creature’s massive, humanoid bulk begins to reveal itself, but only a glimpse—dark and hard and lethal. A large, lidless red eye, fixed on Mari, shines through the fog.



Of course.

Hark, hark! there she is,"
said the girl,
"and there she sits,"
she added, pointing
to a little gray bird
who was perched
on a bough.

"Is it possible?"
said the lord-in-waiting,
"I never imagined it
would be a little, plain,
simple thing like that."

If you don't shut that
thing off right now,
I'm going to come
over there and make
you shut it off.

Perhaps I should continue
the story another time.

Okay.

Goodnight,
Wren.

Goodnight.

Mari and seventeen other orphaned girls, ages ten to fifteen, live in a makeshift orphanage and preparatory school. The large, utilitarian, and dreary building was formerly a government research facility. Almost everything of value and purpose has been stripped away, leaving mostly empty rooms with minimal furnishings.

In a wide room, a low alarm drones. The eighteen orphaned girls, all wearing plain, homespun clothing, shuffle into the room single file. Canvas tarps form a jury-rigged curtain at one end of the otherwise empty space.

The girls sit on the bare floor, arranged in a semicircle. Mari holds a sleeping Wren in her arms. Next to her sits Yazmin Reyes, graceful and reserved, with her hands neatly folded. Behind Mari sits Gemma Phillips, spindly and bouncy, absently chewing her nails.

Gemma: “You better hide that thing. Mother is going to kill you.”

The alarm stops. “Mother” Rupa Bhandari enters the room with a slow stride. She is short and squat, with graying hair atop her stern, round face. Behind her walk Ms. Celeste Okafor and Ms. Olivia Davis, both youthful and vibrant. All three women wear long, simple frocks. They stop in front of the gathered girls.

Mother Rupa’s eyes lock on Mari. “Yellow ARC, come to me.”

Wren awakens. Softly whirring, it hovers over to Mother Rupa’s outstretched arm.

Mother Rupa: “Mari, I would like to speak with you. For everyone else, Ms. Celeste and Ms. Olivia will lead you in your morning calisthenics.”

As Mother Rupa walks toward the curtain of tarps, Ms. Celeste and Ms. Olivia step forward, clapping their hands.

Ms. Celeste: “Okay, everybody up! You heard Mother.”

The area on the other side of the curtain contains three large, round tables, each surrounded by rickety folding chairs. At the center of two of the tables sits an ARC identical to Wren, but each a different color—one blue and one red. Mari enters as Mother Rupa walks over to the third, empty table and sets down Wren.

Mother Rupa: “You know you’re not allowed to remove the ARCs from this room. But you did it anyway. Again.”

Mother Rupa turns to face Mari. “Everything we have must be cherished, because we have so little.” She gestures toward Wren. “This is not yours to take. It belongs to everyone.”

Mari: “I’m sorry, Mother.”

Mother Rupa: “Sorry isn’t enough this time.” She sits down at the table. “You’ll not be allowed to play in today’s match.”

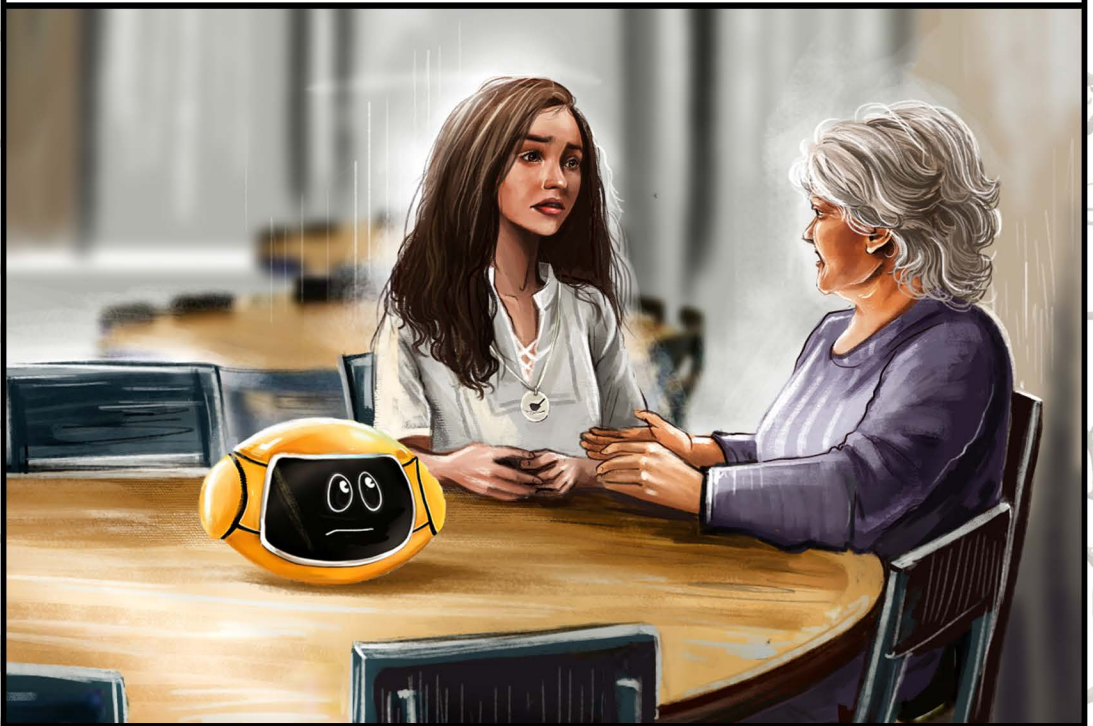
Mari: “That’s not fair! The girls need me.”

Mother Rupa: “You can go with the other girls, but you cannot play. I’ll let your coach know.”

Mari stares at Mother Rupa in sulky silence.

Mother Rupa’s sternness melts from her face. She motions for Mari to come join her. “Come sit down, dear. Please.”

Mari walks to a chair next to Mother Rupa and sits.



Mother Rupa: “You’re not a little girl anymore, Mari. You need to start thinking about how you can best contribute to our community. Santa Faustina needs bright young women like you. We all must do our part to keep on surviving.”

Mari: “Yes, Mother.”

Mother Rupa: “Have you thought about what you want to pursue for your apprenticeship?”

Mari opens her mouth to answer but hesitates.

Mother Rupa: “You’ve always been fascinated with the ARCs and their amassed knowledge. What about training to become an archivist?”

Mari: “I want to work for AdSec. Like my mom.”

Mother Rupa nods. “I see. They accept only the best of us, those willing to do whatever it takes to protect Santa Faustina. Can you put the needs of our community above your own, always?”

Mari: “Yes, Mother.”

Mother Rupa: “Then show me. Show everyone. The younger girls look up to you. You know that. You need to model—”

Mari: “Exemplary behavior.”

Mother Rupa: “Yes. That’s exactly what I was going to say.”

* * *

The outside of the orphanage and preparatory school building is as bleak as the inside. The eighteen orphaned girls stream out its double doors, wearing mismatched shorts and T-shirts. Each girl is smeared with sunscreen to protect them from the harsh sunlight beating down on them.

As the girls linger outside the doors, Mari, Yazmin, and Gemma stand together.

Gemma: “What’s exemplary behavior?”

Mari: “Doing what I’m told. Not getting into trouble.”



Gemma squints in thought. “Well, you don’t want to be stuck with a sanitation apprenticeship.”

Ms. Celeste and Ms. Olivia walk out the double doors.

Ms. Celeste: “Okay, girls, single file. Let’s go!”

As the girls begin to form a line, Brooke walks past Mari and intentionally bumps into her shoulder.

Mari: “Hey!”

Mari starts toward Brooke, but Yazmin holds her back.

Yazmin: “It’s a small town, Mari, and there’s nowhere else to go. Maybe not getting into trouble isn’t such a bad thing.”

In a single file line, with Ms. Celeste at the front and Ms. Olivia at the rear, the girls walk away from the girls’ home along a road of cracked asphalt.

High above the town of Santa Faustina hovers a sleek, stealthy drone. Designed for reconnaissance, it monitors everything below. From this lofty vantage point it’s clear just how small the town is—roughly half a square mile.



The road the orphaned girls walk on bisects the town and is densely flanked by several buildings similar to the girls' home. The tallest of these, the AdSec (Administration and Security) building, is capped with extensive antennas and other instruments.

Smaller roads branch out from the central road, and these roads in turn are flanked by smaller buildings, primarily residences. Like all buildings in Santa Faustina, they are austere and unassuming. The only structures with an obvious purpose are a trio of massive greenhouses in one corner of town.

The entire perimeter of Santa Faustina is surrounded by an imposing chain link fence topped with razor wire, interspersed with guard towers. A few scattered, empty buildings and an abandoned airfield sit outside the fence.

Beyond the town, in all directions, lies a flat, sweeping desert plain dotted with creosote bushes and saguaro cacti.

* * *

Inside a cavernous building that once was a storage facility but currently makes do as a dodgeball court, the sounds of feet pounding, balls bouncing, and girls yelling resound off the bare walls and the cement floor.

Brooke, Yazmin, and Gemma throw and dodge worn rubber balls. Across from them, five girls of similar ages, but from a different school and wearing matching team uniforms, do the same.

Coach Luke Dixon, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest, stalks the sideline, muttering to himself. Mari stands near him, watching the match.

Coach Dixon: “We’re getting killed.”

A ball slams into Gemma. She walks off the court and joins three other girls from the girls’ home. In short order, Yazmin and Brooke are also eliminated.

The opposing coach, standing on the opposite side of the court, blows a whistle. “Nine games for us and zero for you. Want to call it there?”

Coach Dixon: “Let’s play one more.”

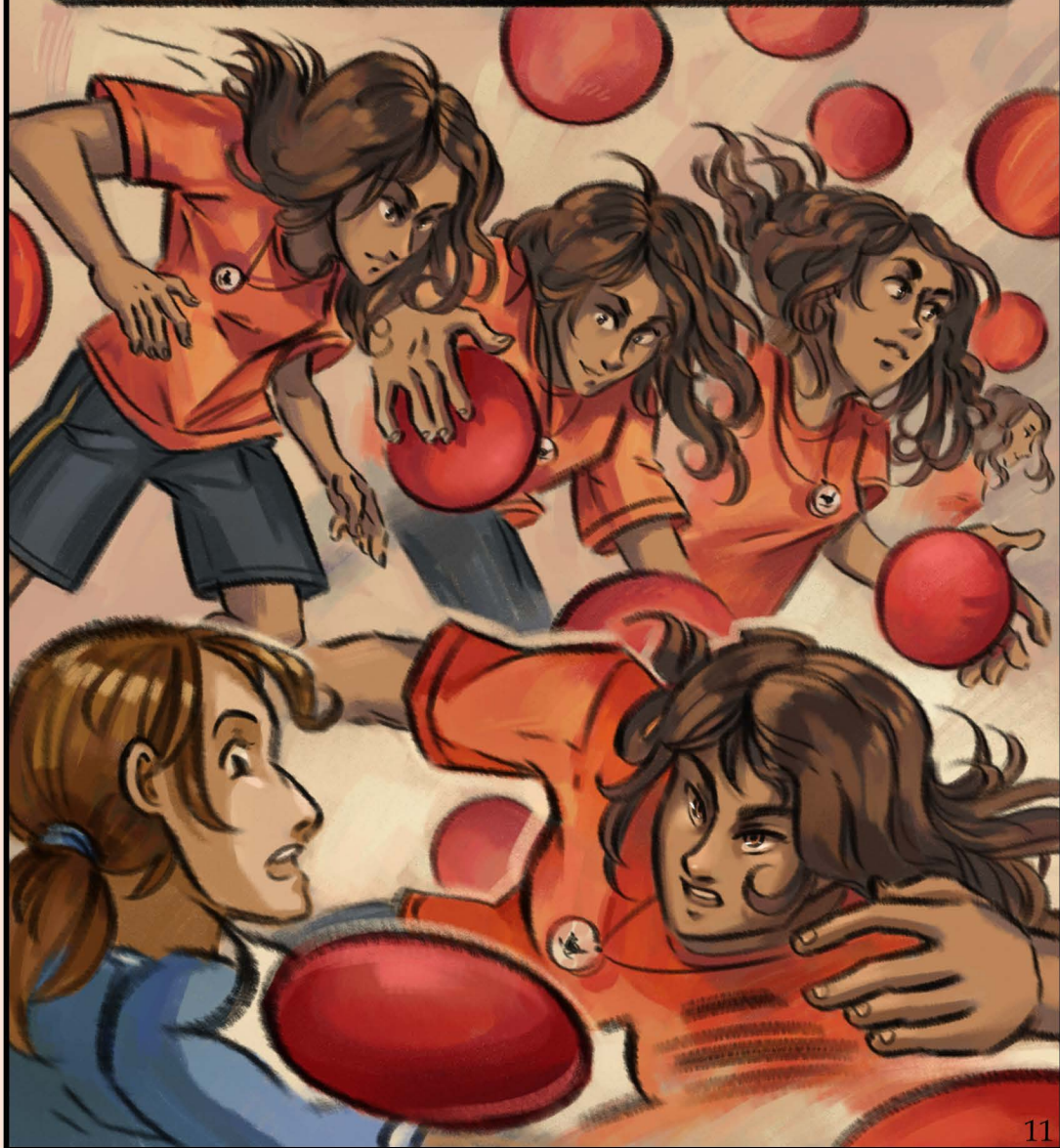
The opposing coach blows the whistle again. Brooke, Yazmin, Gemma, and two other girls from the girls’ home walk onto the court.

Coach Dixon turns to Mari. “Muñoz, get out there.”

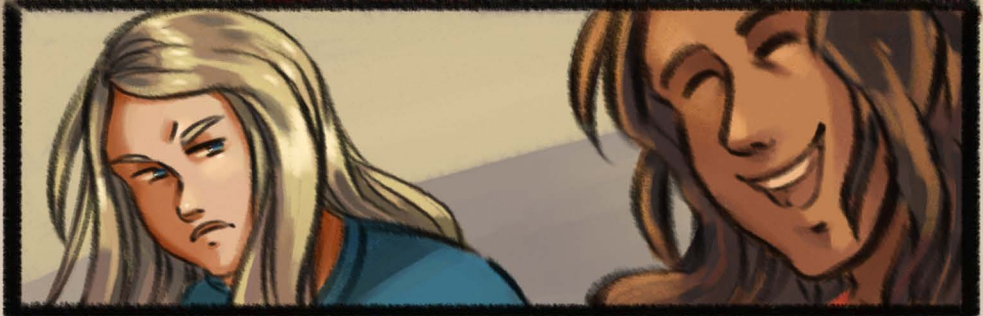
Mari: “But I’m not supposed to.”

Coach Dixon: “We’re not getting shut out. Get out there.”

Mari replaces one of the other girls. The opposing coach blows the whistle, and the match begins. Mari deftly dodges thrown balls, even multiple balls thrown at the same time. She flings balls at opponents, hitting them with unerring accuracy. Mari is in her element, and it all seems to come so naturally, almost preternaturally, to her.



Don't throw where she is,
throw where she's going to be.



A simple desk dominates the tiny room that serves as Mother's Rupa's office. On top of the desk is a sleeping white ARC. Behind the desk sits Mother Rupa. Across from her sits Mari.

Mother Rupa shakes her head. "I simply don't understand, Mari. I made it quite clear that you were not allowed to play today."

Mari: "Coach told me to play."

Mother Rupa slams her hand against the desk. "But I told you not to!"

Mari: "I'm sorry—"

Mother Rupa slams the desk again. "No! You obviously have no respect for me and no appreciation for everything you have. But I will help you see just how fortunate you are. You'll be given no dinner this evening, and you'll sleep outside tonight."

Gasps and murmurs are heard outside the room's closed door.

Mother Rupa: "Whoever's out there better move along, or they can join Mari outside tonight!"

Several pairs of feet scurry away from the door.

* * *

In a concrete alleyway between the girls' home and an adjacent building, Mari lies on a sleeping bag, staring up at the clear night sky in quiet contemplation.

Gemma slinks into the alleyway with her hands cupped under a plump peach. "Mari?"

Mari sits up. "Over here."

Gemma walks to Mari. "Are you okay? What are you going to do?"

Mari: "I'll be fine. It's actually kind of nice out here."

Gemma: "I mean about Mother. She seems really mad this time."

Mari: "I'll be fine."

Gemma kneels next to Mari and offers her the peach.



Gemma: “This was all I could sneak out from dinner.”

Mari accepts the peach. “Thanks, Gemma.” She takes a bite.

Gemma fidgets nervously. “What about the giant ants, Mari? I heard they come for you at night.”

Mari: “They aren’t real. Just stories.” She takes Gemma’s hand and gently squeezes it. “Don’t worry about me, okay?”

Gemma nods her head. “Okay. I better go. I don’t want Brooke to notice I’m gone.”

Mari: “I owe you one, Gemma.”

As Gemma leaves, Mari stares back up at the sky as she eats the rest of the peach. Mari’s eyes light up as an idea comes to her. She calls out in a hushed tone, “Wren.”

Mari waits. Nothing. She straightens up and calls out again, a little louder, “Wren.”

After a moment, Mari hears gentle whirring. Wren floats into the alleyway, face softly illuminated, and lands in Mari’s outstretched arms.

Wren: “What can I do for you, Mari?”

Mari: “I didn’t know that would actually work.”

Wren: “Fortunately for you, my sense of hearing is exceptionally keen.”

Mari: “Weren’t you sleeping?”

Wren: “Yes, but I am never truly asleep.”

Mari sets Wren on the ground. “Wren, tell me about Santa Faustina.”

Wren: “Again? Your questions tend to require answers that are either unknown or restricted.”

Mari: “I know.”

Wren: “Which tends to lead to you becoming frustrated.”

Mari: “I’m already frustrated. Talk.”

Wren: “Very well. Santa Faustina was established as a classified research institute by a partnership of the central government of the Republic of North America and the Xenophon Corporation—”

Mari: “I already know all that. Why are we here?”

Wren: “That’s a very existential question.”

Mari: “I’m talking about the kids, Wren. Why are any of us here in Santa Faustina?”

Wren: “Encouraging employees to bring their families with them was intended to improve work-life balance and increase job satisfaction and productivity.”

Mari: “But the girls at this home don’t have families. Why can’t we leave?”

Wren: “Where would you go? It’s unsafe outside Santa Faustina.”

Mari: “That’s what everyone says. But unsafe how?”

Wren: “That information is restricted.”

Mari lets out a frustrated groan. “Fine. Then tell me about the shutoff.”

Wren: “Information about that incident is also restricted.”

Mari: "I heard it was an attack by a rival country."

Wren: "That is conjecture."

Mari: "I also heard it was an invasion by aliens from another planet."

Wren: "Wild conjecture."

Mari: "Then tell me what you know."

Wren: "Nine years, four months and six days ago, all electronic technology within Santa Faustina ceased functioning. All outside contact was lost. The chief administrator declared a state of emergency and ordered the requisition of all vulnerable equipment."

Mari: "Why weren't you affected?"

Wren: "I was affected. I was nonfunctional for approximately twenty hours."

Mari: "But what caused the shutoff?"

Wren: "That information is restricted."

Mari: "If at least some of our technology came back online, why are we still stuck here over nine years later? Where is the rest of the world?"

Wren: "That—"

Mari: "Information is restricted. I know." Mari lets out another frustrated groan. She slumps her shoulders and settles back down on her sleeping bag. She lies in silence.

Wren: "Would you like me to finish the story about the nightingale?"

Mari turns away from Wren. "No."

Wren: "I understand. Good night, Mari."

Mari closes her eyes. Wren's illumination fades to darkness.

* * *

Three figures dressed in long, loose-fitting clothing made from drab, lightweight fabric walk across an expansive desert.



They each wear a canvas backpack, and their faces are obscured by headscarves and tinted goggles. One of the figures walks in the lead with a confident stride. At its side hovers a purple ARC.

The ARC begins to flash red and sound an alarm. The lead figure points off into the distance, where four black dots appear over a low ridge. The three figures stop moving and tensely monitor the black dots, which shimmer in the desert heat.

After a moment, the black dots charge across the desert toward the three figures. The lead figure runs away from the black dots, motioning for the other figures to follow. They run at panicked, breakneck speed, but the black dots begin to close the gap quickly.

As the dots come closer, their forms become clear. They are drones resembling large, stylized ants, about five feet in length. The six spindly, smoothly skittering legs of each ant rapidly drum the desert floor.

Gun barrels slide out from the top of each ant drone. They open fire as the three figures scream.

In the alleyway adjacent to the girls' home, Mari jerks awake with a gasp. Breathing heavily, she sits up and looks around. She is alone.